

PAN Laos: Connecting Vientiane to the Internet



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The *tuk-tuk* coasted gently across the bumpy road running parallel to the Mekong River for about two kilometres before turning into a compound housing various agricultural and fisheries project offices. The three-wheeled street taxi delivered a team of computer specialists: two from the Science, Technology, and Environment Organisation (STENO) of Lao PDR and the third from the PAN Asia Networking (PAN) team from Singapore. Their arrival in July 1996 ended a long wait by the development experts and their staff working in the compound.

Three months earlier, the occupants had learned that STENO was making preparations to launch e-mail services in the country. The news was welcomed because many of the scientists in the compound were collaborating with various international agencies abroad. The arrival of e-mail would speed up communications with their counterparts, reduce the cost of expensive faxes, and generally quicken the pace of important development programmes.

Helping hands

Upon the team's arrival, enthusiastic helping hands rearranged offices, moved machines, and rewired telephone lines so the computer engineers could start installing modems and loading the required networking software on to hard drives. The reward for this hot, sweaty work came when the computers dialed, for the first time, into e-mail servers housed in STENO and were answered by the chirpy high-pitch chatter of modems "doing an electronic handshake."

The stir that preceded each installation illustrated the exceptional circumstances and challenges of introducing new information and communication technologies into Laos. All of the elements required to run these technologies — trained professionals, computers, telephone lines, modems, and electricity — are in short supply. While each of the project offices is staffed by no less than ten professionals, they typically share one telephone line and one computer among them. The shortage of telephone lines affects STENO as well, where only three lines are available to run the entire national dial-up Internet service.

Historic connections

Until the historic first connections were made, Laos was one of a handful of Asian countries without access to the Internet. But with help from the PAN program, a multi-million dollar initiative funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Laotian government has taken a major step into the information and communication era.

The story began when STENO invited some Laotian information technology professionals who were living and working overseas to share their experiences with colleagues back home. This occurred during an intensive workshop, which reviewed state-of-the-art networking technologies and how they may be applied to meet Laos' needs.

Dial-up e-mail

After the workshop in August 1995, STENO collaborated with PAN in designing an 18-month project to build and pilot test the necessary infrastructure for a dial-up e-mail service. In addition to financial support, PAN also provided its unique management expertise in the development and operation of Internet services for Southern settings.

At this point, STENO established a PAN Laos Committee responsible for Internet services development, user-support, training, marketing, and user representation. Computer hardware and software were installed at STENO by networking specialists from NetCentre, which serves as technical consultants for PAN. In June 1996, three members of the Pan Laos team travelled to the PAN office in Singapore for training.

Pioneering users

Shortly afterwards, in July 1996, Laos became directly connected to the Internet for the first time. Pioneering e-mail users included agriculture and aquaculture researchers, journalists, lawyers, travel agents, computer resellers, and about 20 others in both the public and private sectors. A few months later, the PAN/NetCentre team returned to Vientiane to help debug system problems and train PAN Laos members in setting up an Intranet, which will allow users within Laos to dial-up and download information stored in the server at STENO. During this follow-up visit, STENO and PAN began discussions on launching full Internet services — including access to the World Wide Web, if desired — a step that will require the installation of a dedicated leased line.

This step-by-step approach is widely viewed within Laos as the most effective strategy for both forging international communication connections and creating a national human resource base for future telecommunications industries. Just like the *tuk-tuk* that transported the PAN Laos team on its historic journey, PAN Laos is an appropriate vehicle for the delivery of new information and communication technologies.

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